

1981: The Last Really Great Dylan Tour?

by Peter Stone Brown

It was Flag Day 1981, and I found myself driving south on I-95, taking a friend to see Bob Dylan at some place called the Merriweather Post Pavilion in Columbia, Maryland. It was her first Dylan concert and my tenth. During the ride, I was trying to explain to my friend what she may or may not see at the show, which considering this was Dylan is always a close to impossible task. I told her about *Slow Train Coming*, the all gospel concerts, and how the previous fall, Dylan had started doing some of his classic songs again. As we got closer to our destination we had turned off I-95 onto some new highway on the outskirts of Baltimore where there was a parade of green exit signs that all said "Nowhere." I was hoping it wasn't some kind of sign of things to come.

In May of 1980, I saw Bob Dylan at Bushnell Auditorium of Hartford, Connecticut. For whatever reason, Dylan's all gospel tours had stayed away from the larger cities on the East Coast. I was fully aware of what I was going to see. *Saved* had yet to be released, but I loved *Slow Train Coming*. Just entering the concert was a weird experience. On the steps of the hall, people who reminded me of Harry Dean Stanton in "Wise Blood," were handing out gospel tracts. Except for one new song, "Ain't Gonna Go To Hell For Anybody," the songs didn't hit me - and I was ready to be hit - and Dylan's between song raps, particularly what is usually referred to as "The San Francisco Rap" pissed me off. After the show, waiting for the group of people I'd traveled with to gather, Arlo Guthrie was hanging out. All a sudden, side doors burst open and Dylan and his backup singers surrounded by a group of rent a cops marched onto his bus. A few minutes later, Larry "Ratso" Sloman, then the editor of *High Times* magazine also entered the bus.

When *Saved* was released a couple of months later, I pretty much stayed unimpressed though that would change over time. I stayed unimpressed for a pretty long time. However, late the following winter, maybe in March or April of '81, one night a friend called me up saying I had to come over to his parent's house right away, that his friend Joel was there, and had a new Bob Dylan song that I *had* to hear. The house was in the suburbs. I managed to borrow a car and went. Joel turned out to be photographer Joel Bernstein who had worked with Dylan in 1976 and again in 1978. The song was "Every Grain of Sand," the piano version with Dylan and Jennifer Warnes, and a dog barking in the background. Bernstein, who was a really nice guy said I could hear the song, but couldn't tape it. He graciously

played it again and again. I was floored. It was by far the best Dylan song I'd heard in years. The melody was beautiful, the poetry reminded me of William Blake. Bernstein and I talked late into the night, in fact 'til early the next morning. It would be a decade before I heard that version of that song again.

Merriweather turned out to be a nice late afternoon concert, that if I remember correctly took place entire in daylight. Included were several new songs, and as it turned out, it would be the last time I'd see Dylan sing a new original song before an album was released. There were also some covers, "Abraham, Martin & John," and "We Just Disagree." The first of the new songs as "Dead Man, Dead Man," and the second was "Lenny Bruce," which considering the subject matter left me with the feeling Dylan was about to enter another phase. The third song, from what would turn out to be *Shot Of Love* was "Watered Down Love."

At that point in time, Dylan had been working with the what was essentially same band for almost three years. Keyboard players and background singers had changed occasionally, but the superb rhythm section of Tim Drummond on bass and Jim Keltner on drums remained the same, along with lead guitarist Fred Tackett. At Merriweather, this was an additional; guitarist, Steve Ripley, and the keyboard player was William "Smitty Smith," who'd joined the band the previous fall. Smith's piano work on "Girl From The North Country" was the highlight of show, which ended with Dylan solo, playing guitar and harp on "Don't Think Twice."

After Merriweather, Dylan went to Europe for a series of spectacular shows. The set list grew considerably as more of his older songs were added. Recordings of those shows find Dylan totally at the top of his game. The arrangements made sense, the background singers never seemed out of place, and revisiting his then extensive catalog of songs, Dylan was making them come alive and shine again, almost as if he was remembering who he was and what he'd written.

In October, Dylan launched his first full scale arena tour since 1978, of the East Coast, parts of the Midwest, and parts of the South with a few stops in Canada as well. There was no opening set of gospel songs by the backup singers, the shows were long, with at least 23 and sometimes 30 songs, and on keyboards onstage with Dylan for the first time since 1965 was Al Kooper.

At his Philly show at the Spectrum, Dylan wearing a black leather coat, a white t-shirt, and shades he never removed opened with "Gotta Serve Somebody," bopping all over the stage like a madman. After,

the second song, "I Believe In You," almost as if to get it out of the way, was "Like A Rolling Stone," followed by "I Want You" with Kooper replicating his organ parts on two of Dylan's biggest hits. Some of the songs would start with Dylan singing the first line without any accompaniment or against an organ chord before the band kicked in. The set list was designed to include several special highlights, acoustic song with subtle backing, a duet with Clydie King, and **never songs interspersed** with classics. All the songs would build dramatically, and Dylan would joke with the audience between songs sometimes asking questions, "Am I singing on key tonight," (asked at most concerts during the tour), and "What's the difference between North Philly and South Philly?" At Philly, the encore included a solo "It Ain't Me Babe," where Dylan did one of his favorite tricks of fooling the crowd when they tried to sing along on the "No, no, no" part, and singing it in a different place each time the chorus came up.

Two days later I saw Dylan again at Stabler Arena in Bethlehem, PA. It was a slight dip in the intensity and energy meter from Philly, but Dylan did sing "Happy Birthday" to Arthur Rosato who also played drums on the tour.

Two nights later Dylan played the Meadowlands Sports Complex, just outside New York City at the then very new Brendan Byrne Arena, which has undergone so many corporate name changes since I've totally lost track. This show has been in my top five Dylan shows for almost 30 years. He was not only incredibly on throughout the show, but incredibly funny. I remember coming off the New Jersey Turnpike, and seeing the arena in the distance looking like a gigantic spaceship, and early in the show, Dylan quipped, "might be acting **a little straight right** now.. That's because this is a mighty strange place. I ain't never seen nowhere like this."

We arrived to find we had close to the worst seats in the house, **in the furthers** corner in the highest balcony. It made no difference. On that tour Dylan would often sing at the top of his register, constantly toying with his phrasing. On "I Want You," he seemed to be holding back on the verses, then singing full steam on the bridge, which he repeated.

One of the more magical moments was "Girl From the North Country," with Dylan on acoustic, backed by very quiet bass, drums and lead guitar, which would kick in subtly on the second verse. Dylan sang passionately, sweetly with more tenderness that I'd ever seen him sing in concert before or since. When Dylan sang the line, **many times I'd often prayed** (in quotes?), it was with such emotion that the person I was with - the same person I took to Merriweather -

gasped, and I then knew she understood everything I'd been trying to explain to her about Dylan on that trip four months before. Keep in mind that from where we were sitting, Dylan was pretty much a dot on the stage.

At many of the shows, Dylan would do a duet with Clydie King. In Philly, it was the classic, "All In The Game." At the Meadowlands, Dylan introduced the song by saying, "The songwriter who wrote this song, is here tonight. There's a lot of famous people here tonight. I just want to tell you that you might be sitting next to somebody that's famous." Then Dylan and King, their voices perfectly melding launch into an astonishingly beautiful Jimmy Webb song, I'd never heard before (or since by anyone else) called "Let's Begin." While I'd heard and seen Dylan sing with many other people before and since, I don't think I've ever heard him sing quite as carefully as he did with Clydie King that night. At the end, Dylan said, "I hope we did it alright, Jimmy."

The next high point for me was midway through the show. Fred Tackett played a little intro lick, and then Dylan playing acoustic and singing immediately without any other instruments launched into a slow, almost spooky "The Times, They Are A-Changin'." Now Dylan had done this in the same arrangement at the two previous shows, but at the Meadowlands, it had a whole other edge. This is the reason why Bob Dylan's fans will go to more than one show on a tour, and collect hundreds if not thousands of recordings. You never know what song is gonna hit you and it can be different every night. On this night, the song was anything but the rallying cry of 1964. If anything it was a not quite look back at what didn't happen, and a warning cry for what was to come. After the fourth verse there was a harp solo, and until that time no instruments other than Dylan on guitar, then on the fifth verse, on the second line, a kick drum, followed by lead guitar, and then the bass and drums truly kicked in just for the harp solo.

Almost as if was a couple of decades before, Dylan kept his Martin strapped on and began the next song, "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" alone. The band stayed remarkably in the background, with the backup singers coming in on the chorus, occasionally accented by Kooper playing gospel chords on the keyboard, Dylan's acoustic rhythm driving the song. On the last verse he is truly singing like a poet, letting the words do the work for him. On that night, this version of this song, comes as close to true Gospel music, Staple Singers gospel as anything he did.

Following "Hard Rain," was a brief trip **back to the what was** then current, with "Watered Down Love," before a rocking "Masters Of War" with great jet bomber guitar by Steve Ripley. Then without accompaniment, Dylan sang the opening words to "Mr. Tambourine Man," at first just backed by his own rhythm guitar on a Fender Stratocaster until the band kicked in at the end of the first chorus. On the European tour, over the summer, Dylan had almost turned the melody inside out with incredible results. On the fall tour, he was singing a bit higher on his range, for much of the song he's really only singing two notes, but through some kind of magic makes it seem like a lot more. The band stays pretty much in the background with Kooper's organ dominating and playing what only can be called classic Al Kooper Dylan licks, allowing the whole performance to be Dylan's voice.

This was followed by "Solid Rock." Unlike the version on "Saved," as well as one ones on previous tours, the song has been slowed down to a simmering burn based around the backup singers, and Keltner's drums, accentuated by very funky guitar work by Tackett and Ripley. It maintains that pace for the whole song. The pace of the show is then picked up by "Dead Man, Dead Man," which featured a cool twin guitar solo.

Again starting out alone, Dylan was into "Just Like A Woman," the band again in the background, with Kooper providing the original organ fill at the end of the verse.

Following "Heart of Mine," came perhaps the funniest moment of the night, when in introducing, "When You Gonna Wake Up," Dylan said, I want to say hello to all the editors of *Rolling Stone* magazine. All the editors and writers are here tonight I think, checking me out. They're gonna come backstage later, I'm gonna check them out." Then singing the first verse a-cappella, Dylan launched into a heavy, rocking "When You Gonna Wake Up," which followed by "In The Garden," closed the main portion of the show. However, after the verses, ended, while the song was going on, Dylan both blew my mind and cracked me up by saying, "All right, hello. Thank you. I wanna say hello to Mr. and Mrs. Kooper who are out there tonight. Wherever they are, I wanna say greetings! I'm glad you could make it. Anyway this is Mr. and Mrs. Kooper's relative on keyboards over here. A man I've known for quite some time now. I'm not gonna tell you his name but that's him on keyboards. I should tell you his name anyway. Al Kooper is his name. Played with me twenty years. Maybe some of you heard of him, maybe some of you haven't. A legend in his own time though."

There were still three more songs for the encore, a slow gospel tinged, "Blowin' In The Wind," a searing solo acoustic, "It's Alright Ma," and a half reggae half gospel, "Knockin' On Heaven's Door."

That night particularly, and that little run of three concerts stayed with me for a long time, which turned out to be a good thing, because I wouldn't see Dylan in concert again until five years later. I've seen Dylan in concert more than a hundred times since that October night in 1981. I've seen some great shows, some good shows, some shows that were merely okay, and a couple of bad shows. All of the shows, even the bad ones had moments. But none featured as many songs, out of 28 performed, Dylan sang 27, and while some have come close, none have matched it for sheer consistent intensity of performance throughout.